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ABSTRACT

In the United States, a "two-tiered" school system--elementary and secondary education--is often spoken of, yet throughout this century the trend has been toward a "three tiered" system--elementary, junior high/intermediate/middle school, and high school. This paper reviews literature and research regarding these trends, the advantages and disadvantages of both systems, and the effects of grade organization patterns on students. Particular emphasis is given to the middle/junior high school system. The paper concludes with suggestions for changing grade organization patterns. Appendixes include references, a chart showing secondary grade organization patterns, and an outline of advantages and disadvantages in the systems. (CB)

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Administrative Report

GRADE ORGANIZATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE JUNIOR-SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL MODEL (GRADES 7-12 or 6-12)

by

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This report is a review of the literature on a current educational topic. It is intended to be an unbaised summary and does not necessarily reflect the positions or opinions of the San Mateo County Office of Education or its staff.

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In America we speak of a two-tiered school system--elementary and secondary education--yet throughout this century, the trend has been toward a three-tiered system--elementary, junior high/intermediate/middle school, and high school. Even this does not reflect the true complexity of America's schools. Every conceivable sequence of grades has been used somewhere. For example, in 1978 Providence, Rhode Island, contained all of these forms of elementary/middle schools: K-2, K-3, K-4, K-5, K-6, 2-4, 3-5, 4-5, 5-8, 6-8.[1] However, most attention has focused on the middle tier of schooling.

The Junior High Middle School Movement

The junior high school movement (basically Grades 7-9) began around 1900. It was designed to accomplish a number of improvements over the prevailing K-8, 9-12 model by introducing secondary subjects to younger students and making more efficient use of time (Grades 7-8 being considered repetitive of K-6 instruction). It also attempted to ameliorate the dropout problem by (1) shifting the end of a schooling phase from Grade 8, which coincided with the school leaving age of 14 years, to Grade 9, which did not/ and (2) providing some vocational training in the junior high for those students who would not go to high school. Thus the 6-3-3 pattern developed, along with the 6-2-4 pattern of the four-year high school. The latter fit into areas which had separate elementary and secondary school districts. It was also thought that a 7-8 junior high would be smaller and less expensive, and that better college preparation could be provided in a four-year high school.[2]

The junior high school was intended to provide a fresh approach to the education of early adolescents, who are coping with rapid physical growth,

sexual maturation, changes in social orientation from parents to peers, and intellectual development.[3] It was felt that they fit neither in elementary nor secondary school but needed a special form of curriculum and instruction. But by the 1950s and 60s, some felt that junior highs had failed in their mission, being merely miniature high schools. Hence, another form of early adolescent education--middle school--was proposed and operationalized. Its goals were much the same, but it usually comprised a lower grade organization: 6-8 or 5-8, using the argument that today's youth enter puberty earlier than their grandparents did.

The rivalry between the junior high and the middle school and their rivalry against the older K-8, 9-12 or K-6, 7-12 structures is the focus of most available grade organization research and writing. Of particular concern is the delineation between tiers: Do ninth graders belong in the junior or senior high? Should middle school start at Grade 5 or 6? But there are also repeated questions about the effectiveness of the middle tier itself. For all their rivalry, junior high and middle schools do not seem to have effectively implemented their espoused goals and special features.[4] Feld argues that practical distinctions between the junior high and the middle school are "vague" and that research comparing them on academic achievement, student attitudes, self concept, and facilities is often contradictory or inconclusive.[5]

In fact, no grade organization has been conclusively shown by research to affect student achievement or school climate.[6] Statements on the paucity, poor quality, and inconclusiveness of available research are found in practically every scholarly review on grade organization.

Effects of Grade Organization Patterns on Students

Research has sought to find the impact of grade organization on students' attitudes, adjustment, and social behaviors, e.g., smoking, dating, and delinquency. This research has usually followed one of two themes: (1) a desire to group students by maturational level therefore trying to decide what grades belong in what grouping, and (2) fear that younger students learn bad behavior from older students, therefore trying to determine when and where segregation is warranted by, for example, removing more sophisticated ninth graders from junior high.

In trying to group students by maturational levels, in accordance with the theory that early adolescence is a separate developmental stage, researchers have sought to delineate the age group and the appropriate grades for the middle school. The popular argument for the Grade 6-8 middle school is that students mature earlier today and that Grade 9 students therefore are mature enough for high school. This was disputed by the Committee on Junior High Education of the National Association of Secondary School Principals which in 1959, 1962, and 1967 endorsed the Grade 7-9 structure.[7] Yet Dacus (1963) found that for maturational compatibility sixth- and seventh-grade girls belong together, as do ninth- and tenth-grade girls. But Hilliyer (1972) found the maturational "break" for dividing elementary and middle schools between Grades 4 and 5.[8] Feld defines the middle years of early adolescence as Grades 5-8. But she questions the wisdom of such an age grouping. Citing the Safe School Study which found violence highest in junior high schools, she questions segregating of this volatile age group, which could allow their potential for violence and stress to feed upon itself.[9] Her preferred solution is the K-8 school.

It seems, therefore, that maturational research offers no firm advice on grade organization since there are arguments for including or excluding most grades in any given organization.

The second line of research on student impacts is a mirror image of the first; instead of being concerned with which students should be included because they are alike, it looks at who to exclude because they are different. It specifically asks, "When should we protect younger students from "contamination" by older, more sophisticated peers?"

As far back as 1910, advocates of the junior high school spoke of the "psychic, mental, and moral evils accompanying adolescence."[10] Keeping elementary and middle school students safe from their elders seems (from the literature) to be a major concern. Studies looked for beneficial effects on younger students when the oldest grade is transferred to another school. Madon (1966), for example, reported a feeling of "less tension" among seventh and eighth graders when Grade 9 was removed from their school. He also claimed that discipline was easier and "there is less danger of imitating adolescents who tend to grow up too rapidly."[11] But an extensive 1979 study by Dale A. Blyth and others found that such a grade transfer is of less benefit to younger students than of detriment to older students. In a case where a Grade 7-9, 10-12 secondary system was split into three schools (Grades 7-8, 9-10, 11-12) they found that freedom from Grade 9 students caused only minor changes in Grade 7 and 8 students' victimization, dating, sexual behavior, and self evaluation, although their smoking and drug use did decrease. But ninth graders in their new 9-10 setting felt much more anonymity (it was a larger school) and became more "precocious" through their contact with tenth graders.[12] Another study by Blyth, with Simmons and Bush, followed 800 Milwaukee sixth graders who

either stayed in their elementary school for Grades 7-8 or transferred to a junior high school. It was found that white girls, especially those who had not "succeeded" in elementary school, showed a drop in self esteem on entering a junior high, compared to Grade 7 girls remaining in K-8 schools.[13] What these and similar findings seem to indicate is that it is better to be an older student--"top dog"--at one school than a younger student at another. It may be this movement down the pecking order that causes the problems in school transitions. Yet the research just quoted shows this negative transition effect in Grade 7 and Grade 9. Might it not show up at any age? Indeed, in speaking of the sixth and seventh graders they studied, Blyth and his coauthors ask, "Are these (negative transition) effects long lasting or simply temporary phenomena which will disappear and perhaps even strengthen the youth's ability to cope with later transitions? Is the transition between schools at this age (Grade 6 to 7) more or less difficult than a similar transition two years later when the K-8 students go into high school?"[14] It has been argued, particularly by those favoring the K-8 school, that during the turbulent period of early adolescence students will benefit by staying in a "secure, familiar school setting."[15] Yet if research can come no closer to pinpointing puberty than a three-year grade span, how can educators possibly pick a transition point of risk to the fewest students?

The Importance of Enrollment and Facilities

Thus research has failed to validate any one grade organization as superior or to pinpoint the optimal time of transition for all early adolescents. How then are grade organization decisions made? Very pragmatically, it seems. Desegregation, state standards, and certification laws have been mentioned as influencing the creation of specific schools, but by far the most important decision factors seem to be enrollment

pressure and local building capacities. Surveys done in 1967, 1969, 1977, and 1980 all found enrollment adjustment to be one of the major reasons given for the creation of a middle school. In 1967 and 1969 (when elementary school enrollment was peaking due to the Post-War Baby Boom), enrollment adjustment or overcrowding were the most common reasons given for grade reorganization.[16] A 1981-82 phone survey of 31 districts found that:

> . . . almost all indicated that facility availability and adequacy played a major role in the decision to change . . . . Even the few respondents who indicated a clear preference for a particular type of middle school pattern indicated that the grade organization change probably could not have taken place were it not for a good fit between student numbers and facility availability. In most cases, the decision to change grade organization was made in a manner that permitted the maximum number of students to utilize more up-to-date and specialized facilities.[17]

The presence of a middle-tier school makes the delicate game of enrollment balancing easier, as pointed out in a 1954 national survey. It was found that, if an elementary school got crowded, Grade 6 was passed over to the junior high, which also might receive Grade 10, if the high school were overcrowded. If the junior high school became overcrowded, Grade 7 might be sent to the elementary school or Grade 9 passed back to the high school.[18]

Ben Brodinsky is bluntest of all in his summation of grade organization decision making:

> Researchers and psychologists had a field day listing educational advantages and disadvantages of this or that plan. Most arguments, even though heavily documented, were either specious or nonsense.
>
> The truth was that no educational enhancement but down-to-earth reasons decided the choice of grade alignment. The most practical were the availability, location, and size of a school plant. Parent wishes, preference for school size, and operational costs also helped determine which grades would be housed together.[19]

The Elementary/Secondary Structure: K-8, 9-12 or K-6, 7-12

If fifty years of a three-tiered junior high system offer no concrete benefits, a school district should be free to return to a two-tiered system or, indeed, any other grade organization pattern that seems appropriate. Returning to an elementary/secondary alignment offers two possibilities: K-8, 9-12 or K-6, 7-12. Both systems have their advantages and disadvantages; a list prepared by the Spencerport (New York) Central Schools is presented in Appendix B and summarized here. It seems that there are two basic vantage points from which this decision might be made: (1) philosophical - should early adolescents be treated as children in a K-8 school or as teens in a secondary school? and (2) pragmatic - what facilities does the district have available and how can their cost effectiveness be maximized?

Both the K-8 and the 7-12 school are mainly rural phenomena. Large- and medium-sized school districts tend to use the 6-3-3 or 6-2-4 plans.[20] It might be that these K-8 and 7-12 plans are best suited to a small population base because so many grades housed together could soon add up to a large school. And although the research on optimal school size may be as shaky as that on grade organization, Johnson says that expert opinion supports as desirable an elementary school of 250-300 and a secondary school of 800-1,500.[21]

Two research studies, conducted in Philadelphia in 1975[22] and New York City in 1981-82[23], report actual superiority for the K-8 school over a junior high school plan that follows a departmental instructional mode. The New York study found K-8 schools to have higher reading achievement, better student attitudes toward school, a more humanistic climate, higher student self esteem, and better attendance. There are, of course, studies such as

Caliste's, which could find no significant differences between K-8 and 7-8 in achievement or student adjustment attributable to the grade organization pattern used.[24]

Arguments in support of the Providence, Rhode Island, switch to a K-8 school structure were offered by Feld in the feasibility study[25] and by Jerome B. Jones, Superintendent of the Providence Schools, in 1981.[26] Their arguments are included below.

Advantages of the K-8 School

- The K-8 structure promotes more positive student behavior. The elementary school atmosphere slows down the maturation process and gives some protection from the tremendous peer pressure that often brings drug abuse, truancy and violence to the surface during Grades 7-8. Instead of being "led" by older, more sophisticated students, seventh and eighth graders are serving as role models for younger students.
- The self esteem of seventh and eighth graders continues to rise, instead of plummeting as it can do when they move to being the youngest students of a junior high. They make the transition later when they may be better able to handle it.
- Staying in one school longer promotes student affiliation, security and a sense of continuity with the past and future.
- Teachers have more time to get to know each student.
- A longer elementary program can devote more time to basic skills mastery.
- Because they are more concentrated, K-8 schools can offer more services, such as foreign language and career education.
- As elementary schools, K-8 schools are more likely to be "neighborhood

schools" that are smaller, closer to their community, and in need of less student transportation.

A K-8 plan may inhibit parents from removing their children, presumably to private schools, at the end of sixth grade.

Disadvantages of the K-8 School

- Some students may rebel against staying in "childhood" through two more years of elementary school. The K-8 school may "trap adolescents in childhood when they need to grow."
- As neighborhood schools, K-8 schools may run the risk of provincialism.
- An "elementary" focus in K-8 school might overly narrow the curriculum and guidance options junior high students have.
- To reach all neighborhoods, there need to be more school plants.
- The K-8 model requires a small student population base if its nine-grade span is not to exceed the few hundred students considered ideal for an elementary school. The Echo Baby Boom (the smaller population rise resulting from the Post-War Baby Boom being in its prime childbearing years) is just beginning to swell preschool and primary grades in some areas. This enrollment growth may crowd existing elementary schools and force them to give grades away instead of expanding their own grades to K-8.

The 7-12 schools' advantages and disadvantages are in many cases the logical opposite of those for the K-8 structure, so they may be reviewed more briefly.

Advantages of a 7-12 School

- One 1964 study suggests that "secondary school" style instruction in Grades 7 and 8 leads to slightly better achievement than "elementary school" style instruction, plus pupils given secondary style instruction in Grades 7-8 performed better and felt more comfortable in

high school. (But another study in 1960 showed ninth graders preferred junior high to a 7-12 structure.)[27]

- This structure allows students to "grow up" faster and interact with older people, who can serve as good, as well as bad, adult role models.
- Secondary schools draw from a broader attendance area. This can aid desegration plans and open new horizons for students.
- Earlier secondary education expands the resources and courses available at a younger age.
- Thanks to the passing of the Post-War Baby Boom, secondary schools are in an enrollment decline that will last through the 1980s. Secondary schools have more varied programs and more elaborate facilities. It is more cost effective to keep such facilities fully utilized, if necessary by drawing grades away from less elaborate elementary school facilities. (In the interest of bolstering high school enrollments, many communities have already shifted from a 10-12 to a 9-12 structure.)[28]

Disadvantages of a 7-12 Structure

- The 7-12 structure may push young children too soon into adolescence. In imitating older peers they may learn about drugs, sex, and violence. They may not be ready for the high school social scene and its emphasis on sports.
- Being more centralized and more elaborate, secondary schools are more expensive in terms of operations and transportation.

The K-5, 6-12 plan is not mentioned in the literature. It, of course, is corollary to the 7-12 plan except in its inclusion of Grade 6. The only information available on that issue are the arguments for and against the inclusion of Grade 6 in a middle school, although naturally the prospect of

sixth graders in school with seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds is a somewhat different matter than their presence in a middle school.

In arguing for the inclusion of Grade 6, Riew and Larson cite the ". . .potential benefits accruing to the sixth graders enrolled in secondary schools under the middle school organization which offered a broader curriculum and more specialized instruction and facilities."[29] An Educational Research Service report concluded that "Most of the research in this area . . . indicated that the 6th grade was the most appropriate entry level grade for the middle school.[30] Of course, the dire warnings about mixing younger students with older still remain.

There are other grade organizations beyond K-8 and 7-12 that may be considered and adopted. Johnson reports that several California districts have successfully adopted a K-7, 8-12 plan, in one case apparently due to a political preference for closing a junior high rather than neighborhood elementary schools.[31] As noted earlier, Providence, Rhode Island, employed multiple grade level organizations, as do other cities. Authors point out repeatedly that grade structure matters <u>far</u> less than program quality and teacher effectiveness. The moral seems well expressed in a survey of Monroe County (New York) superintendents, who successfully adopted a wide variety of grade organizations. The survey states that "the adopted organizational product is not nearly as important as the care given to planning and programming the organization."[32]

Cost is one aspect that has not been explored. It cannot be, because it depends so greatly on local facilities and conditions. Only one example is provided by the literature. Through a conversion of all its different elementary grade structures into K-8 schools, the Providence, Rhode Island, schools, it was estimated by the superintendent, would save $750,000 to $1.5 million per year. Of course as an older, Eastern-seaboard city,

Providence faced extensive renovation costs, almost all of its school buildings being 50 to 100 years old.[33] Those costs figures therefore are of little use to California schools.

The Process of Change in Grade Organization

In making a decision to adopt a 7-12 (or 6-12) school structure, a community would need to ask itself these philosophical and practical questions:

1. Do we feel our early adolescents are capable of handling the expanded opportunities of high school and the faster pace of its social life? Or would we prefer to prolong their childhood through a K-8 or middle school structure?
2. Is our community suffering from declining secondary enrollment, so that it would be advantageous to add grades to the high school, whose expensive facilities should be more fully utilized? Or is our secondary student population still so large that a 7-12 structure would overcrowd our available secondary school space?

Johnson gives the following advice on planning any grade reorganization:

- Identify the alternatives.
- Define your goals.
- Plan far in advance for curriculum and staff development. (A shake-up in grade organization can be a good time to implement other changes.)
- Pay attention to the new groups of students coming in. (Failure to do this was the most frequently mentioned problem in Johnson's survey.)
- Develop orientation programs and monitor the adjustment of students and teachers.
- Ensure that everyone works for articulation.
- Explain the change to parents and the public.[34]

Joe DiGeronimo also has some down-to-earth advice on making a grade organization change, drawn from his experience of adding sixth graders to his intermediate school.

- The principal should take the initiative to persuade parents of the value of the change. Coffee clatches, Parent Information Nights, and "road shows" can be used to answer parents' questions and calm their worries.
- Give an assembly for incoming students in their old school and an orientation in their new building, led by upperclassmen.
- Sell the idea to existing students, showing them how expanding the student body can bring in additional funds and opportunities.
- Use the need for more staff to select the best teachers available.
- See if, in sprucing up the campus for the change, you can get a few extra amenities, like gymnastic equipment.
- In the first few weeks of the plan, allow for upsets and confusion. Be available to help the new students.
- Carefully review school rules to see if they are appropriate for new students. You might decide, for example, that sixth graders will not be allowed to attend night dances. When the rules are prepared, communicate them to students and parents.
- Praise your new students when they adapt well.
- Make the grade reorganization a happy experience.[35]

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[6]ERS Research Brief, pp. 27-28.

[7]ERS Research Brief, pp. 6-7, 9-11.

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[24]Edward R. Caliste, Do School Organizational Patterns Make Difference? (1975), ERIC Document ED 116 344, pp. 4-7.

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[32]"Spencerport Central Schools, January 7, 1982, in Grade Organization Patterns in Schools: A Review of the Literature (Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools, Department of Educational Accountability, 1983), ERIC Document ED 248 609, p. 60.

[33]Jones, p. 31.

[34]Johnson, pp 110-113.

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APPENDIX A

Secondary Grade Organization Trends 1920-1980

	1920[A]	1948[B]	1952[A]	1959[A]	1960[B]	1980[C]
9 - 12	94%	35%	46%	30%	40%	49%
10 - 12	--	36%	8%	21%	34%	15%
7 - 12	5%	16%	36%	42%	14%	22%
Other	1%	18%	--	--	11%	14%

Sources:

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C. "Statistic of the Month: Grade Span and Enrollment Size of Public Schools," American Education, April 1983, p. 56.

APPENDIX B

FROM: Joseph A. Hawkins and Others, Grade Organization Patterns in Schools: A Review of the Research (1983), ERIC Document ED 248 609, pp. 58, 65-68.

Spencerport Central Schools, January 7, 1982.

In a mimographed paper from Spencerport Central Schools, Spencerport, New York, educational advantages and disadvantages of various patterns of grade level organization were discussed. The pros and cons of the following structures are outlined in this article: 8-4, 6-6, 6-3-3, 5-3-4. (Only the arguments for 8-4 and 6-6 are presented here.)

8-4 (GRADES K-8, 9-12)

FOR

1. Keeps pupils in the elementary school environment longer.

2. More emphasis could (perhaps would) be given to the traditional so-called fundamentals; the teacher would be with the pupil for the entire day or most of it and thus could provide better instruction and guidance.

3. The gap between elementary and secondary education would come later when the pupil would be better prepared to cope with it.

4. Articulation between elementary and secondary education would be more easily achieved since there would be only one bridge to effect rather than two.

5. "Growing up" socially would occur later.

6. Home-school cooperation might be more easily attained.

7. Schools would probably be nearer the home of the pupil, and transportation problems might conceivably be decreased in grades seven and eight.

AGAINST

1. The curriculum for grades seven and eight might in some instances be much narrower (without or with much less adequate libraries, shops, science rooms, physical education facilities, homemaking rooms, arts and crafts rooms, guidance provisions) and thus would provide for the needs of these pupils markedly less adequately.

2. If an enriched program were attempted, it might under certain circumstances and in a number of schools, call for considerable duplication of special rooms and equipment which would not be utilized fully.

3. The program of activities for grades seven and eight might tend to be very limited and inadequate for pupils in grades seven and eight.

4. Securing of elementary teachers for grades seven and eight would be difficult.

5. The opportunities of pupils in grades kindergarten to six might be seriously interfered with by making provisions for the older pupils to provide equivalent opportunity, both capital outlay and current expense costs would tend to be considerably greater.

6. Forces early adolescents to interact continually with pre-adolescents.

7. Forces pupils to make a rapid adjustment from elementary to high school.

8. The gap between elementary and secondary education might easily be so wide that it would be extremely difficult to bridge.

9. Adequate guidance and necessary experience to facilitate bridging the gap to secondary education would be more difficult to provide.

10. Denies early adolescents a school of their own and a broader curriculum offering appropriate to their needs.

6-6 (GRADES K-6, 7-12)

FOR

1. Provides secondary program continuity for a longer period of time than K-8, 9-12.

2. Provides a broader range of courses for younger students.

3. Provides earlier competition and break-away from the elementary school.

4. Provides more mature 12-14 year olds an opportunity for interaction with older students.

5. Provides a subject-centered program in the secondary school.

6. Provides specialists to teach courses in the secondary schools.

AGAINST

1. Forces earlier break from elementary schooling than K-8, 9-12.

2. Pressures pupils between 11-14 to place their childhood behind them.

3. Creates larger secondary schools.

4. Creates constant interaction between young adults and early adolescents.

5. Teachers more subject matter than child oriented.

6. Departmentalization means decreased flexibility in exploring various subject areas.

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